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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001267

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TAGS: PGOV PTER PREL KISL IS LE
SUBJECT: HIZBALLAH UNVEILS ITS NEW MANIFESTO

Classified By: CDA, a.i. Thomas F. Daughton for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah delivered a seminal speech on November 30 that detailed Hizballah's vision for Lebanon and the future of "the resistance." The last time Hizballah produced such a statement was nearly a quarter century ago, in February 1985.

The new manifesto is characterized by a general lack of the group's familiar war rhetoric, and focuses instead on political posturing that places Hizballah firmly among Lebanese political entities that are integral to the state. Nasrallah also decried American hegemony, called for political deconfessionalization in Lebanon, and stated Hizballah's intention to continue to thwart "Israeli aggression." Significantly, his speech did not include a specific call for the establishment of an Islamic state or describe the liberation of Palestinians as Hizballah's *raison d'être*, as was the case in the 1985 declaration. Local political and media reaction to Nasrallah's speech divided predictably along political coalition boundaries. However, Nasrallah's choice of language portrayed him as a shrewd politician who intends to advance Hizballah's influence in and on the Lebanese system. End summary.

WHAT NASRALLAH DID AND DID NOT INCLUDE

¶2. (SBU) Hizballah SecGen Hassan Nasrallah delivered a much-anticipated speech on November 30 that detailed the "political and ideological plans" of Hizballah. Speaking via video uplink for approximately two hours -- the longest period Nasrallah has been live on air since the 2006 war -- he covered three major areas in his speech: "hegemony and awakening," in which he decried American hegemony and predicted declining American influence in the world; Hizballah's vision for the state of Lebanon, both domestically and in relation to regional and western countries; and the issue of "Palestine: negotiations and compromise."

¶3. (SBU) Notably, Nasrallah devoted a substantial portion of the speech to discussing political sectarianism in Lebanon. Leaving ample room for interpretation, he asserted that Hizballah would support deconfessionalization of the Lebanese system. However, with the expectation that such a change would take considerable time, he said Hizballah would continue to advocate for the current "consensual democracy" model. He made no distinction between Hizballah and Lebanon as separate entities, instead positing Hizballah as an integral part of the state. Noticeably absent from the speech was any reference to "wilayat al-faqih" (an Islamic state), an objective that Hizballah specified in its first manifesto in 1985. Similarly, references to the liberation of Palestinians as a Hizballah *raison d'être* were omitted and the position of Hizballah vis-a-vis the Palestinians was nuanced as combating "Israeli aggression."

REACTION MIXED

¶ 14. (C) Lebanese reaction to Nasrallah's speech predictably split along coalition lines. Hizballah's position on deconfessionalization appears to have been coordinated with Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, who in recent weeks has proposed convening a committee to study the issue, as called for in the 1989 Taif Accord. Opposition media outlets, including those of Hizballah Christian ally Michel Aoun, lauded the Hizballah proposal for its "vision and thought for the nation."

¶ 15. (C) Naji Abi Assi, advisor to President Sleiman, offered a nuanced analysis of Nasrallah's speech in a December 1 meeting with the Charge. Abi Assi thought the Hizballah declaration would carry greater weight because it was presented as a formal, written statement rather than just a speech. He also believed that it reflected a recognition by Hizballah that the organization could not operate independently of other Lebanese sects. Abi Assi assessed that Nasrallah's language about deconfessionalization could be interpreted as an olive branch to the other groups, as it represented a significant departure from its stance in 1985.

¶ 16. (C) Less enthused were cabinet ministers from Prime Minister Saad Hariri's March 14 coalition, who criticized Nasrallah for ignoring the relevance of the National Dialogue process. Incoming Labor Minister Boutros Harb asserted to polstaff that Nasrallah "undermined" the Dialogue process when he included a place for "resistance" in a future national defense strategy. Similarly, new Minister of Environment Mohammad Rahal believed that Nasrallah only

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confirmed Hizballah's insistence on maintaining its weapons. He added that despite the other political issues raised by Nasrallah, the declaration was "nothing except words." March 14 SecGen Fares Souaid interpreted the speech as an effort to place Hizballah as "taking the lead in defending the oppressed in the world." He believed Nasrallah intended to portray Hizballah as seeking universal objectives, rather than as a purely Lebanese entity. Souaid also objected to Hizballah's calls for continued "consensual democracy" in its current form, in which Hizballah has retained a de facto veto power in the government, codifying in practice a compromise clause from the 2008 Doha Agreement that ended a protracted political stalemate.

¶ 17. (C) COMMENT: A shrewd politician, Nasrallah left open plenty of room for interpretation as to Hizballah's objectives for the future. The new manifesto clearly seeks to cement Hizballah as a political player in Lebanese affairs, and one that at least verbally recognizes the authority of the state. Lest one assume Hizballah has reformed completely, however, Nasrallah maintained that its "resistance" was the only credible deterrent that has protected -- and will protect -- Lebanese sovereignty. Nasrallah waited nearly 25 years to reveal Hizballah's ideological plans for the future. He probably chose to do so now to capitalize on attention focused on the new government's ministerial statement and to underscore that despite allegations against it, Hizballah's ministers and MPs can work with others. Strategically, Nasrallah also needed to put a strong face on his organization to counteract the damage done to its reputation by the opposition's losses in the June parliamentary elections, rancor over suspected weapons in south Lebanon, and the Ezzedine scandal. It is too soon to predict whether Hizballah's tactics will change to follow the new manifesto, but for the moment Nasrallah is making noises that are resonating well among his Shia base and Hizballah's allies alike.

DAUGHTON